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THE BOARDMAN LECTURESHIP IN CHRISTIAN ETHICS

(FOUNDED ANNO DOMINI 1899)

"MISSION TO MANKIND"

DELIVERED BEFORE

THE UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA

February 12, 1957

BY

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THE FOUNDATION

On June 6, 1899, the Trustees of the University of Pennsylvania accepted from the Rev. George Dana Boardman, D.D., LL.D., and his wife a Deed of Gift, providing for a foundation to be known as "The Boardman Lectureship in Christian Ethics," the income of the fund to be expended solely for the purposes of the Trust. Dr. Boardman served the University for twenty-three years as Trustee, for a time as Chaplain, and often as Ethical Lecturer. After provision for refunding out of the said income, any depreciation which might occur in the capital sum, the remainder is to be expended in procuring the delivery in each year at the University of Pennsylvania, of one or more lectures on Christian Ethics from the standpoint of the life, example and teachings of the Lord Jesus Christ, and in the publication in book form, of the said lecture or lectures within four months of the completion of their delivery. The volume in which they are printed shall always have in its forefront a printed statement of the history, the outline and terms of the Foundation.

On July 6, 1899, a Standing Committee on "The Boardman Lectures in Christian Ethics" was constituted, to which shall be committed the nominations of the lecturers and the publications of the lectures in accordance with the Trust.

On February 6, 1900, on recommendation of this committee, the Rev. George Dana Boardman, D.D., LL.D., was appointed Lecturer on Christian Ethics on the Boardman Foundation for the current year.

6-8-57 Gift Rev. the author,

THE OUTLINE

I. The Purpose

First, the purpose is not to trace the history of the various ethical theories; this is already admirably done in our own noble University. Nor is it the purpose to teach theology, whether natural, Biblical, or ecclesiastical. But the purpose of this Lectureship is to teach *Christian Ethics;* that is to say, the practical application of the precepts and behavior of Jesus Christ to everyday life.

And this is the greatest of the sciences. It is a great thing to know astronomy; for it is the science of mighty orbs, stupendous distances, majestic adjustments in time and space. It is a great thing to know biology; for it is the science of living organisms—of starting, growth, health, movements, life itself. It is a great thing to know law; for it is the science of legislation, government, equity, civilization. It is a great thing to know philosophy; for it is the science of men and things. It is a great thing to know theology; for it is the science of God. But what avails it to know everything in space from atom to star, everything in time from protoplasm to Deity, if we do not know how to manage ourselves amid the complex, delicate, ever-varying duties of daily life? What will it profit a man if he gain the whole world—the world geographical, commercial, political, intellectual, and after all lose his own soul? What can a University give in exchange for a Christ-like character? Thus it is that ethics is the science of sciences. Very significant is the motto of our own noble University—*"Literae Sine Moribus Vanae."*

And Jesus of Nazareth is the supreme ethical authority. When we come to receive from him our final awards, he will not ask, "What was your theory of atoms? What did you think about evolution? What was your doctrine of atonement? What was your mode of baptism?" But he will ask "What did you do with Me? Did you accept Me as your personal standard of character? Were you a practical everyday Christian?" Christian Ethics will be the judgment test.

In sum, the purpose of this Lectureship in Christian Ethics is to build up human character after the model of Jesus Christ's.

II. Range of the Lectureship

Secondly, the Range of the Lectureship. This range should be as wide as human society itself. The following is offered in way of general outline and suggestive hints, each hint being of course but a specific or technical illustration growing out of some vaster underlying Principle.

1. *Man's Heart-Nature.*—And, first, man's religious nature. For example: *Christian* (not merely ethical) precepts concerning man's capacity for religion; worship; communion; divineness; immortality; duty of religious observances; the Beatitudes; in brief, Manliness in Christ.

2. *Man's Mind-Nature.*—Secondly, man's intellect-nature. For example: *Christian* precepts concerning reason; imagination; invention; æsthetics; language, whether spoken, written, sung, builded, painted, chiseled, acted, etc.

3. *Man's Society-Nature.*—Thirdly, man's society-nature. For example:

(a) Christian precepts concerning the personal life; for instance: conscientiousness, honesty, truthfulness, charity, chastity, courage, independence, chivalry, patience, altruism, etc.

(b) Christian precepts concerning the family life; for instance: marriage; divorce; duties of husbands, wives, parents, children, kindred, servants; place of woman, etc.

(c) Christian precepts concerning the business life; for instance: rights of labor; rights of capital; right of pecuniary independence; living within means; life insurance; keeping morally accurate accounts; endorsing; borrowing; prompt liquidation; sacredness of trust-funds, personal and corporate; individual moral responsibility of directors and officers; trust-combinations; strikes; boycotting; limits of speculation; profiting by ambiguities; single tax; nationalization of property, etc.

(d) Christian precepts concerning the civic life; for instance: responsibilities of citizenship; elective franchise; obligations of office; class-legislation; legal oaths; custom-house conscience; sumptuary laws; public institutions, whether educational, ameliorative, or reformatory; function of money; standard of money; public credit; civic reforms; caucuses, etc.

(e) Christian precepts concerning the international life; for instance: treaties; diplomacy; war; arbitration; disarmament; tariff; reciprocity; mankind, etc.

(f) Christian precepts concerning the ecclesiastical life; for instance: sectarianism; comity in mission fields; co-operation; unification of Christendom, etc.

(g) Christian precepts concerning the academic life; for instance: literary and scientific ideals; professional standards of morality; function of the press; copyrights; obligations of scholarship, etc.

In sum, *Christian* precepts concerning the tremendous problems of sociology, present and future.

Not that all the lecturers must agree at every point; often there are genuine cases of conscience, or reasonable doubt, in which a good deal can be justly said on both sides. The supreme point is this: Whatever the topic may be, the lecturer must discuss it conscientiously, in light of Christ's own teachings and character; and so awaken the consciences of his listeners, making their moral sense more acute.

4. *Man's Body-Nature.*—Fourthly, man's body-nature. For example: *Christian* precepts concerning environment; heredity; health; cleanliness; temperance; self-control; athletics; public hygiene; tenement-houses; prophylactics; the five senses; treatment of animals, etc.

In sum, the range of topics for this Lectureship in Christian Ethics should include whatever tends to society-building, or perfectation of personal character in Christ. Surely here is material enough, and this without any need of duplication, for centuries to come.

III. Spirit of the Lectureship

Thirdly, the Spirit of this Lectureship. Every lecture must be presented from the standpoint of Jesus Christ. It must be distinctly understood, and the founder of the Lectureship cannot emphasize the point too strongly, that every lecture in these successive courses must be unambiguously Christian; that is, from the viewpoint of the divine Son of Mary. This Lectureship must be something more than a lectureship in moral philosophy, or in church theology; it must be a lectureship in Christian morality, or practical ethics from the standpoint of Christ's own personal character, example, and teachings.

IV. Qualification of the Lecturer

Fourthly, the Qualification for the lecturer. The founder hopes that the lecturer may often be, perhaps generally, a layman; for instance: a merchant, a banker, a lawyer, a statesman, a physician, a scientist, a professor, an artist, a craftsman; for Christian ethics is a matter of daily practical life rather than of metaphysical theology. The founder cares not what the ecclesiastical connection of the lecturer may be; whether a Baptist or an Episcopalian, a Quaker or a Latinist; for Christian ethics as Christ's behavior is not a matter of ecclesiastical ordination or of sect. The only pivotal condition of the Lectureship in this particular is this: The lecturer himself must be unconditionally loyal to our only King, our Lord Jesus Christ; for Jesus Christ himself is the world's true, everlasting Ethics.

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"And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father. . . . And from His fullness have we all received, grace upon grace. For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God; the only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known."[1]

I

The longer I am privileged to be associated with university people, the more I become convinced that the most pressing religious issue today is the problem of making God real. The difficulty so many people have is not that they think God untrue but that they find Him unreal. It is one thing to believe in God and hold opinions about Him; almost all of us do that. It is entirely another thing, however, to be confronted by God as an inescapable reality and to meet Him as the most vividly experienced power of life. To so many people God is not a stirring reality but only a matter of belief and opinion.

Another way of putting this is to point out that the religious question which is currently being asked in the most persistent and urgent fashion on the university campus is, whether or not it be phrased in this fashion, the question of knowing the will of God. For the problem of feeling the reality of God involves at bottom an asking for the living God who intrudes upon the individual in a specific way,

[1] John 1:14-18. Biblical quotations are taken from the Revised Standard Version.

who addresses the individual so as to make Himself known not only as to His own nature but as to the concrete terms of His relationship and relevancy to the individual's life, and especially in such a way as to include the individual in the carrying out of God's plan. And that in effect is the problem of knowing the will of God.

It is perfectly true that there is a revival in religion on our campuses. It is necessary to realize, however, that this revival consists not so much in people making a final commitment to a religious faith but rather in the intensity and the insistency with which they ask the question of how to know God's will. On every side there is an eager curiosity to discover what religion is and what it has to say, together with a genuine concern to understand how it applies to modern living. By no means has this resulted in a wide-spread rushing to church membership; but on the other hand it is not just another search for some theoretical copestone or ultimate first cause or absolute principle. Instead, this is an asking about a God who, in addition to everything else He is, has a definite effect on human life, has a purpose and possesses the power to work out that purpose, a God who relates this directly to the life of the individual and does things here and now in the course of history. Either God is a present help or He is not much help at all. Fundamentally this is not simply the problem of the being of God but the more intimate and consuming one of knowing God's will, of meeting God as He impinges directly on our lives in order to accomplish His purpose, of feeling for oneself the presence and reality of God as these

apply to contemporary life and apart from which God is inconsequential.

II

What I want to suggest in this Boardman Lecture on Christian Ethics is that this situation is precisely the place where a religious ethic begins to come into being. For the definitive mark of a religious ethic is its strict orientation to the will of God. Here is the radical breaking point between the ethic of religion and that of secularism. In modern secularism reality is considered to be nothing more than a passing flux of temporal events. Consequently, secularism does not need to be bothered about the will of God. Its ethic may take either one of two basic forms: it may be oriented to the will of the individual or it may be determined by the will of society. Both of these have the advantage of being discoverable in a ready fashion and of being free from the complications of that which is beyond the here and now.

When a secular ethic is founded on the will of the individual, it moves out from the conviction that a man belongs to himself and that his primary duty is toward himself. The individual is the center and goal of existence. I am my own god. In this ethic each individual determines the standards to which he appeals and the kind of person he is impels him to the kind of standards he adopts. As to this, one observer (Ivan Panin) has made the following comment, "My neighbor tells me there is no God; I give him his dinner; this much I owe him. I keep my eye on my spoons; this much I owe

to myself." That, to be sure, is a cruel thrust because many of us know atheists who have unquestioned honesty. Certainly theists have no monopoly on moral integrity. It is, however, a thrust in the right direction because it points to the fact that in an ethic which rests on the will of the individual each one is making up his own standards and there is always the possibility that these may change at any moment in order to serve his own interest. His standards have no objective reference or validity beyond himself; they must be invented from one moment to the next.

When a secular ethic is based on the will of society the conviction is involved that a man belongs to his community and that his first and only duty is to his fellow men. Human life is conceived as the basic value. Society is enthroned and becomes the supreme architect of the individual's nature and destiny. "The voice of the people is the voice of God." The definition of one's neighbor may indeed move from the narrow circle of family through the more inclusive circles of school, community, nation, race, United Nations, and perhaps on to the traditional concept of "the greatest good of the greatest number." But even when the group becomes extremely large the foundation is still the same, namely that no member of the group has any duties which transcend the group's life any more than he has any significance apart from his worth to the group. And the danger of some form of totalitarianism becomes all but inescapable.

It is in contrast to these two forms of secular ethics that the constituting element of a religious ethic

becomes obvious. For the determining conviction here is that a man belongs to God and so exists primarily not for his own purpose nor for that of society but rather as a creature of the divine purpose. His supreme duty, therefore, is neither to himself nor to his fellow men but to the God who has created every man and who wills to work out His plan in every life. This by no means cuts the ground out from under the individual's duty to himself and his duty to his neighbor; indeed, men are deeply responsible to one another just because they are absolutely responsible to God. These personal and social duties, however, no longer exhaust moral obligation and become a subordinate though real part of moral living. Beyond and above these is the individual's overriding duty to God, and, in the final analysis, this is the only lasting safeguard against the anarchy and injustice of excessive individualism on the one hand and some stifling and enslaving form of totalitarianism on the other. A religious ethic is based squarely on the conviction that each man belongs to God alone and that God has an unconditioned claim on his life. It views every temporal event as pointing to something beyond itself, to a ground from which it originates and to a goal towards which it proceeds. God is looked upon as both the creator and the fulfiller of life and His will is thus the decisive factor, a will which is seriously involved in the passing flux of temporal events and even works itself out in those events, but a will which is also the unifying and meaningful factor above and beyond them and is thus absolute and transcendent.

III

This centrality of God's will is seen most emphatically in the ethic of the Christian faith. It is found in Jesus' words: "You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect."[2] The same note is struck when Jesus warns: "Not every one who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven."[3] St. Paul also underscores this: "Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may prove what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect."[4] The basic structure of the Christian ethic is this vertical dimension between the will of God and the will of man.

Man's obligation toward the will of God finds application in the specific areas of human involvement. In regard to the field of politics, Jesus says: "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's."[5] The will of God is similarly brought to bear on the sexual aspect of life: "From the beginning of creation, 'God made them male and female.' 'For this reason a man shall . . . be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one.' What therefore God has joined together, let not man put asunder."[6] Racial differences are also included: "Have we not all one father? Has not one God created us? . . . From one blood He has created every race of men to live

[2] Matthew 5:48
[3] Matthew 7:21
[4] Romans 12:2
[5] Mark 12:17
[6] Mark 10:6-9

over the face of the whole earth."[7] With respect to economics and material possessions, the orientation of the Christian ethic is again perfectly plain: "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth . . . but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven . . . for where your treasure is, there will your heart be also . . . no one can serve two masters . . . you cannot serve God and mammon."[8] God requires an absolute obedience and will not allow the distractions which stem from an undue love of possessions. Even with regard to family relationships, the same thing is true: "Who are my mother and my brothers? . . . Whoever does the will of God is my brother, and sister, and mother."[9] And, of course, in the harsh experiences of enmity and hostility, the whole basis for the requirement that we are to love and forgive our enemies is to be found in the fact that God loves and forgives us.[10]

This is not to be understood as though God's will were a kind of salve to be applied wholesale to human problems. Rather this is the conception of the all-inclusive will of God which is the touchstone of ethics and which requires an absolute obedience; it is a will which cuts through all the matted layers of human problems in order to reach the people involved and relates itself in ever fresh ways and endless constructions to the situations of real life. The fact that its ethic is thus determined by this one vertical reference to the will of God is the sine qua non for understanding the Christian community. Thus Reinhold Niebuhr can say, "The

[7] Malachi 2:10 and Acts 17:26
[8] Matthew 6:19-24
[9] Mark 3:33-35
[10] Cf. Matthew 5:44-48

ultimate moral demands upon man can . . . be affirmed only in terms of a unity and a possibility, a divine reality which transcends human existence. The order of human existence is too imperiled by chaos, the goodness of man too corrupted by sin, and the possibilities of man too obscured by natural handicaps to make human order and human virtue and human possibilities solid bases of the moral imperative."[11] The same point was made by Mrs. Maggie Meeks, the mother of one of the young Marines who were drowned in the Parris Island night march. Said Mrs. Meeks, when questioned about her feeling toward Sergeant Matthew McKeon who had been largely responsible for the tragedy: "The Lord says 'Don't hate nobody.'" Whether it be in the sophisticated learning of a profound theologian or in the simple insight of an uneducated woman, here is the same awareness of the centrality and sovereignty of God's will in determining the course of moral action. God is the creator and judge of the world and the guarantee of its meaningfulness.

The leading question, then, which is raised by a religious ethic, and by the Christian ethic in particular, is this: how to know the will of God? The Christian ethic depends for its very being on the possibility of this question being answered and it depends for its abiding existence on the fact that this question is continually being answered. It is through this question that one must approach the Christian ethic. There can be little doubt that this is the most difficult question of all and there can

[11] "An Interpretation of Christian Ethics", Harper and Brothers, 1935, p. 50

be no doubt that this is precisely the question which has to be answered if one is to come to grips with the heart of the Christian ethic as well as with the current revival of religious interest and search on our campuses.

IV

The Christian faith has a definite answer to this because this is the question of revelation. A religious ethic is primarily an ethic of revelation. But revelation needs to be carefully understood. The clue to the New Testament's understanding of it is found in the prologue to the Fourth Gospel: "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father . . . . No one has ever seen God; the only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known."

This clue has four significant insights. One of these is the indication of our need for God to make Himself known. Only if God declares Himself can man know and understand Him decisively. This stems initially from the vast distance which exists between God and man. For God is not simply the most exalted of the observable powers nor even the sum of these powers. He is, instead, the Power who gives all forces their being and power and by whom all power is measured. He is in a real sense the boundary of human life so that God and man are not at all interchangeable terms. "My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways

and my thoughts than your thoughts."[12] The act of creation itself speaks of this distance. God is forever Creator and man forever creature and the distance between them can never be destroyed. As Karl Barth has said, "He acknowledges Himself to be our God by creating and maintaining the distance by which we are separated from Him."[13] It is because of this that man cannot know God decisively simply by his own resources. Such knowledge must depend on God overcoming the distance and making Himself known.

A potent factor in this distance is the personal nature of God. When the Christian faith speaks of God as personal it does not mean that God can be contained within the bounds of what we know as personality. It does mean, however, that with everything else He is, and given the fact that He is a great deal more than personal, He is at least personal. God's personal nature is curiously enough at once the factor which makes possible for man a decisive knowledge of God and yet is also a factor in the distance between them. It, too, contributes to making the possibility of knowing Him depend on the disclosure of Himself. This is always true of relationships between personal beings. If one is to get to know another human being, that person must first of all open himself up and disclose himself. Unless he speaks or acts one cannot get to know his inner nature. It is possible, of course, to ascertain certain things about him through such studies as anatomy, sociology, and psychology; but, if one is

[12] Isaiah 55:8,9.
[13] "The Epistle to the Romans," 6th edition, Oxford University Press, 1933, p. 41.

to gain first-hand knowledge of his special individual nature, he must open himself up through such channels as conversation and action and shared experiences.

It is certainly true that we can know something about God on our own, so to speak. The study of science can give us some impression of the unlimited power of God, the tremendously wide scope of His activities in the universe, the astonishing complexity of His planning and sustaining which science laboriously uncovers, the vast ocean of life for which He is responsible. In the study of aesthetics, as we come to appreciate the nature of beauty and see it in the appealing grace of childhood, in the surge and thunder of the sea, in the dazzling splendor of a mountain peak and in the smell of woodsmoke, we can be led to believe that if we are going to think of God we had better do so in terms of perfect beauty. Ethics can draw us on to picture God as absolute goodness and the study of logic can suggest that we are to understand Him as final truth. All this is helpful but none of it is decisive. It leaves God as some unfocused abstraction who never quite comes to grips with us. It certainly does not disclose the personal will of God striving to open up the dead-end ways of life, to redeem despair and futility, and to provide a spearhead against old and entrenched evils. Here, too, in His personal nature, is reason why the distance between God and man has to be bridged by God taking steps to make Himself known.

V

The second insight which St. John's words contain is that the understanding of revelation in the Bible is chiefly determined by the analogy of the word spoken and heard as distinct from the idea of revelation as vision. "No one has ever seen God." The point here is not to search the Bible for texts which appear literally to contradict this one, such as the Exodus statement that: "Moses and Aaron . . . went up, and they saw the God of Israel,"[14] or St. John's own report of Jesus' words: "He who has seen me has seen the Father."[15] The point rather is to come to grips with the underlying situation. God does indeed make Himself known in many fashions and through many vehicles. As a matter of fact, all existence is a medium of His revelation for He is the Creator of all existence. Thus we can get to know something about God through the starry heavens and through the moral law, in the history of the Philistines and in the history of Israel, in love and tragedy and joy, in Buddha and Plato and Mohammed. In all this, however, God's first purpose is to reveal Himself, to disclose His own nature and being to men insofar as they are able to receive Him. More specifically it is to unfold His nature and being as these cut directly into human life. In other words, God seeks to reveal His will; that is what He communicates. For the will is basically the organization of personal life around a purpose and the gearing of life so as to achieve this end in spite of obstacles that must be overcome. The question of knowing God is that of

[14] Exodus 24:9.
[15] 14:9.

knowing the God who discloses Himself as willing to create us, to know us, to judge us, and to save us. He makes Himself known as related to our life and active upon it. This problem of knowing God's personal nature organized to act on human life and to achieve His purpose in history is just the problem of knowing the will of God.

Herein begins to emerge the central importance in Biblical theology of the word of God. For the word of God is the appropriate vehicle to achieve the communication of God's purpose and will for human beings. "So shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and prosper in the thing for which I sent it."[16] One does not see the will of the Creator any more than one sees the Creator. The Creator can never be seen in this life but He can in part be understood when He chooses to make Himself knowable. The fellowship and communion which exist between personal beings depend not on sight but on insight, not on light but on enlightenment, not on physical vision but on understanding and feeling. Thus the word of God, while acknowledging and preserving the distance between God and man, still affirms that God does make Himself knowable and approaches human life in a fashion intelligible to man and claiming his response. So the communication of God's will to man by means of the word of God assumes paramount significance.

Human beings are rational creatures and as such have the capacity for communicating with one

[16] Isaiah 55:11.

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another by means of language. A distinctive mark of human life is the fashioning and using of words as major channels of communication. Words become tools by which one person is able to transmit his thoughts and feelings to another. Both the spoken and the written word become effective vehicles for conveying meaning and purpose, for sharing an understanding of the content of one's thought and feeling. They may do so in a powerful manner for there are times when words rise to towering heights imparting profound wisdom, stirring up noble emotions, and providing stimulating leadership.

God also communicates with man by means of the word. For one thing the word of God means the spoken word by which God conveys to man His plan and purpose, His demand and judgment and promise. Thus God's word came to the prophet Jeremiah in the year 626 B. C. saying, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations . . . to all to whom I send you you shall go, and whatever I command you you shall speak."[17] With that Jeremiah knew what to do with his life. God's will had become clear and specific. In similar fashion people throughout the ages have heard God's word spoken to them, it may be in prayer and in the life of devotion, in sacrament and in the study of Holy Scripture and in the events of daily living, laying bare God's desire for them and disclosing His purpose.[18]

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[17] Jeremiah 1:4-7.

[18] For a recent example of the way in which even a hard event can be the occasion for the discovery of God's purpose, see Jesse Stuart's book "The Year of My Rebirth," McGraw Hill, 1956.

Then, too, the word of God means the written word which through the medium of prophets and apostles God uses to express His will to men. About the middle of the 8th century B. C. the prophet Amos wrote down words which had been awakened in him by God in order that he might interpret God to his fellow men. In this fashion the books of the Bible were composed by men in written form so that God's message might be communicated. This meant that God's word could be preserved and shared so that many could read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest it. Amos wrote, "Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream."[19] And confronted by these written words men could understand that God was disclosing Himself as a just and holy will. So the words of the Bible, written by men to whom God addressed Himself, are vehicles by which God makes clear to us His message.

VI

But true as this is, and as remarkable and transforming as are these spoken and written words through which God makes plain His message to men, the word of God is always above and beyond them and can never be reduced to them. Here is the third insight which St. John uncovers for us. For God does not simply communicate with man, He communicates Himself to man. God wills much more than to say something or to have something written. He wills to give Himself to us. He does not preach a sermon or write a book but He comes into our lives. He does not deliver a law or compose

[19] Amos 5:24.

a creed but He imparts His own person. He does not set up a code of ethics, for His message is Himself. This is the point where words as we know them fail. The spoken and the written word are tragically insufficient because neither can ever give the fullness of a personal presence. Since God is personal, He can never express Himself adequately in anything less than the personal; and man being personal can fully understand only that which is personal. Hence a totally new kind of word is needed.

We see this in our own experience. It is said that one day Pavlova danced before a large audience in the Metropolitan Opera House. One man was intensely moved by her last dance. He went backstage and asked her, "What did you mean by that last dance?" To which Pavlova replied, "If I could have said it I should never have danced it." The deep things of life are frequently thus. The life-transforming feeling of love which one has for that person who is dearest above all others can only to a very limited extent be spoken of or written about. Very quickly the spoken or written, "I love you," falls short. Full communication and satisfaction come not in speaking or writing but in the actual self-giving of one person to another. The word must issue into living personal presence. If God is to address us as rational beings and yet give us as His message that fullness of His personal presence which is His will active in human life, then He must do so not simply in speech or writing but by means of fashioning a completely new word, a living word which is His own person present among men. Only the word which "became flesh

and dwelt among us" can bear God Himself. God's word, then, His message and will, are not simply spoken or written words, not even the words of the Bible itself. The language of speech and writing are too weak to communicate God; only the language of incarnation suffices. Thus the word of God is purely and simply Jesus Christ, God in person. He is what God has to say to us and what God has to say to us is Himself living a human life. God's new and living word is Jesus Christ. In Him God achieves the full communication of His personal nature and will to human beings.

VII

Revelation is thus seen to be an encounter between God and man. It is not a body of spiritual truths or a deposit of superior knowledge. It is not a special set of propositions or rules of behaviour, not even an authoritarian moral code. Instead, it is the event in which a meeting takes place between God and man and so God's will is made known to be performed in the particular situation. The Christian faith finds the supreme revelation in Jesus Christ because in Him it finds that the decisive meeting of God and man has occurred. It is to this event that Christianity looks in order to discover the answer to the question how to know the will of God. The basic text of revelation is thus not the Ten Commandments or the Sermon on the Mount but rather the words of St. John's Gospel which we have been considering.

The meeting of God and man in Jesus Christ is decisive for two reasons: First, God found in Jesus

an adequate and perfectly cooperating material through which to express Himself. Here was a life of sinless perfection, a life of total obedience to God and you ransack history in vain to find another. God has, of course, expressed Himself through other materials than Jesus but none of them so adequate and responsive. We see God swing the tides and we say He is powerful. We watch Him bring the spring to bloom, and we say He is beautiful. But neither the ocean tides nor the flowers of spring can fully show forth the responsible concern and the self-spending love which are at the heart of personal life. God speaks through the prophet Amos with his glorious message of social righteousness. He speaks through the apostle Peter as Peter vows loyalty to the death. But Amos and Peter are men with the faults and frailties of human nature. Amos shows little or no feeling of mercy to those who sin and Peter betrays his master. Except for Jesus no other material is entirely suitable or willing or sensitive enough to reveal God fully. There is in Jesus no incidence of evil or sin which might introduce a defect or distortion into the revelation given through the medium of His person. Instead, Jesus presented a material which was at once complete and unrestricted in its response to God. In everything, He served God perfectly and totally. His whole life illustrates and gives substance to His prayer "Thy will be done." His desires and passions, His affections and ambitions and instincts were all surrendered without qualification to the work of God at hand. Here for once in history was the material adequate to show forth God.

The second reason why this meeting is decisive is that in Jesus God acts with His deepest and most significant intention, that of giving Himself in the loving personal presence which is the supreme expression of His will. God works, indeed, in other events and persons than Jesus but with different intentions. He leads His chosen people out of bondage in Egypt in order to give them a creative freedom. He brings the sun up in the morning, as we put it, in order to give light and heat to the world. He speaks through the prophet Hosea to show something of His renewing forgiveness. He acts through St. Paul to demonstrate His concern that the gospel is for all sorts and conditions of men, not for special interest groups alone. He acts through Jane Addams in the Chicago slums and through Albert Schweitzer in the jungles of Africa to show His practical concern for the needy. But in Jesus Christ, God's intention is to reach out and rescue His whole creation, to do that one infinite and unique act which God alone can do, to make known His unresting will for the completion and redemption of creation by giving His own loving presence to those who need that more than anything else. In Jesus, God shows Himself at His deepest and most personal dimension in relation to human life. Since the material is here perfectly coordinated to the divine will and since God's intention is here the highest of all, namely to make known His will to give us nothing less than Himself in saving action upon our lives, the result is that in Jesus Christ we meet the supreme revelation of God, the decisive event in which God encounters man.

It is here, then, that the Christian faith discovers the answer to the question how to know the will of

God. As Peter responds when Jesus asks him if he too intends to go away and seek elsewhere, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life; and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God."[20]

VIII

With this, the fourth major insight involved in the understanding of revelation is opened and once again St. John directs our attention to it: "We have beheld His glory." Revelation is, to be sure, an event in which God acts to disclose Himself but it is also an event to which man responds in such a way as to find here a center of meaning for all history. The revelatory event has to be apprehended and received by man. It must be appreciated so that it becomes for him the illuminating center which gives unity and direction to life. It is the pivotal event which lights up existence. Thus the Bible contains and in fact is the record and witness of those events in which people have been interrupted by the acts of God and have found therein their sense of meaning. They come to see that the meaning of life is not to get but to give, not to preserve but to serve, not to keep but to care. They come to see that the way of going through the difficult times of life is just this way of giving and loving and sometimes of suffering, this way of living deeply and trusting God. They have found this peculiarly with regard to Jesus Christ. When His influence fell on men and women they felt that in Him they were meeting the power of life and love which guides

[20] John 6:68,69.

the very universe. They found in Him a complete kinship of spirit with all the things which made them to be men and women. They came to feel, too, that the world itself was strangely dependent upon Him and that this power and this love which they could see and feel in Him were the very backbone of life. In Him they discovered something which was so deep and basic, so close not only to their own hearts but to the heart of the universe itself, that they came to see Him as the center of all existence.

As William Temple put it, "The principle of revelation is . . . the coincidence of event and appreciation. . . . Revelation is chiefly given in objective fact, yet it becomes effectively revelatory only when that fact is apprehended by a mind qualified to appreciate it."[21] Man in his freedom is, of course, able to reject these events, with the result that although they still have revelatory character no revelation would be effected. Revelation is revelation only when there is response and appreciation.

IX

This point leads directly to the contention of this lecture. It is in the revelatory encounter between God and man that Christian ethics actually come into being. The sense of urgency and of being placed under inescapable demand which accompanies involvement with the will of God is the source of a religious ethic. The illuminating event reaches out to lay its hold upon us and to claim us in such a way that we find a new beginning offered to us

[21] "Nature, Man and God," Macmillan and Co., 1935, pp. 315, 318. Cf. also the excellent discussion in H. R. Niebuhr, "The Meaning of Revelation," Macmillan and Co., 1952, Chapter IV.

which we cannot evade. In this encounter man finds the unconditional call or charge of God and feels the responsibility to serve the will of God. This is the very origin of religious ethics, for the awareness of obligation and the resulting decision for moral living are man's response, in gratitude and love, to God's intrusion and His demand for obedience. "What does the Lord your God require of you, but to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all his ways, to love Him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul . . ."[22] The Christian ethic has its origin in this encounter with God and in the decision for obedient living which God summons from man and which is man's acknowledgment of God's right to command.

Whereas Immanuel Kant tried to derive religion from the sense of obligation in ethics, the Christian faith sees the ethical sense of obligation arising from the basic fact of religion, namely the encounter with God. It is when we first know the will of God that we then come to know our duty. As the prophet Amos testified, "The lion has roared; who will not fear? The Lord God has spoken; who can but prophesy?"[23] Or as St. Paul discovered, "Necessity is laid upon me. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!"[24] The word of God comes tagged with my own name and address. "It is as if in the theatre, where I am hugely enjoying an aesthetic view of life, God interrupts the show with a stentorian announcement: 'Is John Smith in the house?' And I am John Smith. And the interruption continues: 'Report

[22] Deuteronomy 10:12.
[23] Amos 3:8.
[24] 1 Corinthians 9:16.

immediately . . . for a task intended for you alone.' "[25] It is in the encounter with God and the discovery of His will that there is born the feeling of personal responsibility and decision to serve this will. Here the question of knowing the will of God is transformed and becomes the question of doing the will of God. Here Christian ethics take their start.

A magnificent illustration of this is to be found in an experience of Abraham Lincoln during the difficult period prior to his signing the Emancipation Proclamation.[26] He was persuaded that it would be useless to issue the Proclamation without the military force to back it up. A group of uninformed clergymen from Chicago who were advocating immediate and universal emancipation visited President Lincoln and took it upon themselves to give him the benefit of their advice. "The subject," said Lincoln, "is one upon which I have thought much for weeks past, and I may even say for months. I am approached with the most opposite opinions and advice, and by religious men who are equally certain that they represent the divine will. . . . I hope it will not be irreverent for me to say that if it is probable that God would reveal His will to others on a point so clearly connected with my duty, it might be supposed that He would reveal it directly to me; for unless I am more deceived in myself than I often am, it is my earnest desire to know the will of Providence in this matter. And if I can learn

[25] Paul S. Minear, "Eyes of Faith," Westminster Press, 1946, p. 19.

[26] Cf. the account by Carl Sandburg in "Abraham Lincoln—The War Years," Harcourt Brace and Co., 1939, Vol. I, pp. 569, 570.

what it is, I will do it. These are not, however, the days of miracles, and I suppose it will be granted that I am not to expect a direct revelation. I must study the plain, physical facts of the case, ascertain what is possible, and learn what appears to be wise and right. The subject is difficult, and good men do not agree." The grasp of obligation, the sense of meaning, the demand laid upon oneself, these are learned in the individual's personal encounter with God. For what is revealed is God Himself in action on human life, the will of God working itself out in human affairs. It is this which summons man and enlists his devotion. Thus Martin Luther could indicate that just as each one must do his own dying so must each one do his own believing.

What revelation means, then, cannot be expressed in terms of propositions or codes or principles. Its expression occurs only in the responsive actions of the individuals concerned as they are caught up in the immediate situations of existence. When man acknowledges God to be Lord, when he responds to God's claim with grateful obedience, when he meets God's love with his own responding love, then the will of God begins to be fulfilled and the meaning of revelation to be expressed. "We find . . . God only when he so incontestably touches and seizes us that we wholly yield ourselves to him."[27] This affirming of God's will is the beginning of the Christian ethic. Revelation finds its expressed meaning in the decision for ethical living which issues out of it, that is to say in individuals committing themselves to the will of God and, in consequence, acting

[27] Herrman, "Der Begriff der Offenbarung," p. 11, quoted by H. R. Niebuhr, op. cit., p. 152.

in the service of that will by working it out in specific life situations. In this way moral living and its standards are not only directly related to the will of God but even owe their origin and being to man's encounter with that will.

Here is where we find that the ethical demand, since it is the claim of God and therefore ingrained in the very structure of the universe, is itself utterly serious. Its imperative is the imperative of Him who has created all life and who wills to be in charge of all life. This is the sense in which it is experienced as law, as the moral law which is part of the given fabric of life and which comes to meet us. It is a demand from which there is no escape, which makes no exceptions and brooks no rebellions. It is an ethic which scrutinizes motive as well as act, which applies to enemy as well as loved one, whose standards of measurement are not the pleasure of self or the prudence of society but the perfection of God. It is, therefore, an ethic which lives on the love and forgiveness of God. For the Christian faith has no naive illusion that the knowledge of God's will issues inevitably into the doing of God's will. The depth of Christian realism is indicated by St. Paul's agonized cry, "I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do."[28] The problems of my own frailty and sin are complicated by the additional problems of the innumerable conflicts of interest and the bewildering complexities of life which mark modern society. Both because of my own nature and because of the nature of society, the attempt to do God's will is never guaranteed of suc-

[28] Romans 7:19.

cess and, in fact, is marked by repeated failure. In the last resort, the ethical demand which God places upon us is a demand for perfection and, consequently, in our present lives we are unable to fulfill it. The Christian faith, however, possesses resources to deal with this, both in the fact that people devoted to God's will are given strength to achieve beyond their own wisdom and power ("from His fullness have we all received, grace upon grace") and also in the fact that they are enabled to experience the mercy and forgiveness of God which alone make tolerable the gap between knowing and doing His will.

X

It follows that the initial word of the Christian ethic is never the command, "Go and be good," but always the invitation, "Come and meet God." To start with the former would be like admiring the cut flowers in a florist's window and being all the while completely unmindful of the soil and rain and sunshine which give them their being and beauty. The Christian ethic is not first of all the placing of commandments over us or the publishing of laws which we must obey or the urging of general principles to be applied to specific situations. It takes its start in the fresh and vigorous spirit of God's presence which breaks into human lives and seizes possession of them, with the result that they become inspired and invigorated and in this power their lives are changed at the very root of their being.

Throughout the entire history of the Christian community one sees this experience of people who encounter God and, as His will lays an urgent hand

upon them, transforming moral results follow. Cowards become heroes; cheaters begin to go straight; fear and greed are overthrown; envy and selfish pride are expelled. Not only are particular faults overcome but positive virtues are brought into being. The cruel and filthy minded become filled with love and purity of heart. Into people who have failed badly there comes a reactivating power of goodness. Men are released from the forces most likely to damage them and are given the incentive and power to become what in their best moments they know they ought to be. In endless succession men become aware of the vast moral struggle which is going on in the universe and they enlist themselves as live instruments of God's purpose. For when God invades human lives, men learn His will and are filled with a spiritual drive and a gay, unconquerable courage to match their vision. It is true that this spirit, this having the mind of Christ, can come to express itself in such terms as the Ten Commandments and the Sermon on the Mount, but it is primarily the power which moves men from within because it has grasped their lives and possessed their inner being, rather than a set of authoritarian codes or rules applied to them from without. As the Asian theologian D. T. Niles observes, "The Sermon on the Mount is more a statement of what will happen to a man when he allows Jesus to get hold of him, than a statement of what a man must do if he is to follow Jesus."[29] And when St. Paul says, "Have this mind among yourselves, which you have in Christ Jesus,"[30] he is not so much giving an order

[29] "That They May Have Life," Harper and Brothers, 1951, p. 47.
[30] Philippians 2:5.

as he is describing what happens to people who have been caught up in that living fellowship with God which constitutes Christian community. Indeed, it is precisely this which describes the situation in which the Christian finds himself, and which is the ethical situation. The foundation of the Christian ethic is just this fellowship with Jesus Christ as the supreme revelatory event in which we encounter God as He works out His purpose in history. In this illuminating center of life the will of God is discovered for each concrete situation.

For God's will must be learned anew for each moment. It is the will of the contemporary living God, new in every new moment, and, therefore, needing to be learned afresh for each specific now. It cannot be merely generalized or subsumed under large principles but must be discovered alive in each situation. This does not, however, result in chaos. For it is the same God working out His single, immutable purpose for creation whose faithful will is involved in each moment and who thus knits all moments together and gives unswerving direction to the multitude of occasions. His plan underlies all creation and He sees the end from the beginning. "God's purpose, always revealed de novo and 'for the time being,' is a continuing purpose which seeks a single end."[31] It is for this reason that in the experience of the generations the will of God may come to be expressed in terms of large principles and moral laws, provided it be recognized that God's will can never be reduced to a given law or principle and provided it be recognized further that

[31] Minear, op. cit., p. 162.

God's will is ever flexible and alive while laws and principles are often rigid and embalmed. Revelation is always God's activity brought to bear upon man and never man's codes or laws directed to God. What is valid in the forming of principles and laws is the testimony these bear to the fact that there is a common experience throughout the ages which can be used as a check-point. Thus the Christian community, the fellowship of people bound together by their encounter with God in Jesus Christ and herein confronted by His will, is itself the community wherein certain common understandings may be built up beyond the experience of a given individual. It is not that the encounter with God and the discovery of His will can take place only through regular, orthodox channels. God is certainly a God of order and He does not prefer irregularity to order; but He is quite capable of dispensing with rules or regulations or normal channels if the situation demands it and that possibility must never be ruled out. The point, however, is that the encounter and discovery normally, though not exclusively, take place within regular channels and so the Christian community becomes the balance against extreme individualism. Herein each may check his own understanding against the experience of others, many of whom are far more spiritually mature than he is. Thus the necessity for each person to have his own experience of personal encounter out of which comes his own understanding of God's will for him is placed in the wider context of a fellowship whose members are engaged in the same experience so that common understandings are possible.

XI

It is here, then, that we discover the decisive and shaping fact of the Christian ethic. On the one side, there is God giving Himself to man in Jesus Christ and thus creating that personal encounter which is the bringing of us into fellowship with the will of God, God's own person in loving and saving action on our lives. Therein lies God's mission to mankind. On the other side, there is our own testimony to this illuminating center of existence wherein the will of God is discovered for the concrete situations of the day, and our actual living out of this center; here is our loving and grateful response to the demand of God as He becomes vivid and real and reaches out to lay His hand upon us, this being itself the primal origin of obligation as well as the source and sustaining power of that claiming urgency which is the Christian ethic. And therein, one concludes, lies our own mission to mankind.

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